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## “HERMES DISKOBOLOS”

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WHEN Mr. Georg Habich, a few years ago,<sup>1</sup> attempted to overthrow the accepted identification of a marble statue<sup>2</sup> in the Vatican as a discus-thrower, and endeavored to prove that the statue was a copy of the Hermes Diskobolos by Naukydes, he advanced two main arguments. One was based on his observation that not one of the many discus-throwers on vase-paintings resembled the marble statue. This observation is no longer correct, there is a figure on an unpublished red-figured *deinos*<sup>3</sup> in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston which does resemble the statue (Fig. 1). The only noteworthy difference between the two figures is that the Boston athlete seems to be walking, while the Vatican athlete is represented as standing; the other differences are slight and readily understood, if one assumes that the vase-painting exhibits the adaptation of a statuary type.

One of Mr. Habich's arguments is thus invalidated, and it becomes a duty to investigate more carefully also the worth of his second argument. He has based it on his interpretation of a passage in Philostratus<sup>4</sup> and his personal view of how a discus-thrower ought to take his stand, viz. with his left leg in advance. The Vatican statue has the right leg advanced.

<sup>1</sup> *Jahrbuch d. kais. Deutsch. Arch. Inst.* July, 1898.

<sup>2</sup> Mus. Vatic. no. 1615; Friederichs-Wolters, no. 465; Baumeister's *Denkmäler*, I, fig. 503, or Springer-Michaelis, *Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte*, fig. 406.

<sup>3</sup> Mentioned by Mr. E. Robinson in the *Twenty-first Annual Report* (for 1896) to the Trustees of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, p. 33, no. 2; also *Arch. Anz.* 1897.

<sup>4</sup> *Imag.* I, 24.

Mr. Habich will undoubtedly be the first to acknowledge the insufficiency of an argument based solely upon subjective considerations; and the investigation, therefore, resolves itself to the interpretation of the passage in Philostratus, which reads:

- βαλβίς διακέχωσται μικρὰ καὶ ἀποχρῶσα  
 ἐνὶ ἐστῶτι, ἥ δὴ τὸ κάτοπιν καὶ τὸ  
 δεξιὸν σκέλος ἀνέχουσα πρηνῇ τὰ  
 ἔμπροσθεν ἐργάζεται καὶ κονφίζουσα  
 5 θάτερον τοῖν σκελοῖν, ὃ χρὴ συνανα-  
 πάλλεσθαι καὶ συμπορεύεσθαι τῇ δεξιᾷ.  
 τὸ δὲ σχῆμα τοῦ δίσκου ἀνέχουτος  
 ἐξαλλάξαντα τὴν κεφαλὴν ἐπὶ δεξιᾷ  
 χρὴ κυρτοῦσθαι τοσοῦτον, ὅσον ὑποβλέψαι  
 10 τὰ πλευρὰ καὶ ῥιπτεῖν, οἷον ἀνιμῶντα  
 καὶ προσεμβάλλοντα τοῖς δεξιοῖς πᾶσι.

The only reference to the relative position of the legs is contained in τὸ κάτοπιν, and the question arises whether Philostratus was speaking of both legs when he said τὸ κάτοπιν καὶ τὸ δεξιὸν σκέλος (the leg in the rear and the right leg), or whether he was only speaking of 'the right leg in the rear.' Grammatically it is possible to interpret the passage either way, especially if one remembers the aversion which many writers had to using the word ἀριστερός, 'left,' which was believed to be a word of ill omen. The context of the passage, however, shows that τὸ κάτοπιν does not refer to the right leg, because the peculiar shape of the little stand (πρηνῇ τὰ ἔμπροσθεν) relieved 'the other' (θάτερον) leg of much of the weight of the body. 'The other'<sup>1</sup> is the left leg, because it is contrasted with the δεξιὸν σκέλος just mentioned. If the left leg, therefore, bears less of the weight of the body, it must be in the rear, for the very slope of the base implies the lean-

<sup>1</sup> Even without reference to a preceding δεξιός, θάτερος is commonly used of the 'left.' Very rarely it is used of the 'right,' and then only if the 'left' has previously been mentioned; e.g. *Il.* XVI, 734, σκαίῃ ἔγχος ἔχων, ἐτέρῃφι δὲ λάζετο πέτρον.



FIGURE 1. — DISCUS-THROWER ON AN ATTIC RED-FIGURED VASE IN THE BOSTON MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

ing forward of the body, and consequently its weight being supported by the advanced leg.

The whole passage, freely translated, reads as follows :

“A small stand of earth is thrown up big enough to support one man who stands on it with both feet, of which the left is in the rear. This base is made sloping to the front, and by this device enables the left leg to get free of much of the weight of the body; for this left leg must accompany the violent forward movement of the right side.

“The discus-thrower himself ought to stand as follows: with his head turned to the right he ought to stoop enough to be able to glance along his ribs. When he is making the throw he must, as it were, straighten up with a jump and throw in the additional weight of his entire right side.”

The first part of the passage contains the description of the *βαλβίς* and the first position of the athlete on it; the second part describes his second position, when he is ready to hurl the discus, and has stooped and twisted himself like the discus-thrower after Myron. The athlete has *not* changed the position of his legs (Myron's statue has the right leg in advance), because a change of legs is useless unless it is accompanied by a forward movement of the body to add weight to the throw; and on a small *βαλβίς*, just "big enough to support one man," this is obviously impossible, for the left foot cannot advance beyond the spot held by the right foot, and in a change of legs, therefore, would compel the right foot actually to make a move backward, thereby retarding the throw, rather than accelerating it.

Modern athletes, and Mr. Habich with them, do not agree with Philostratus; they do not use a base from which to hurl the discus, nor do they make a "stationary" throw, but one "on the jump"; they even say that it would be impossible for them to throw the discus far, if they were to follow the instructions of Philostratus. This, however, does not invalidate the testimony of Philostratus for the interpretation of ancient representations of discus-throwers. Philostratus found in the description of a painting the immediate cause for his discussion of the discus-throw, and his descriptions of the positions of the athlete were probably based upon his personal knowledge of famous statues. His second position, therefore, agrees with the discus-thrower after Myron, while his indicated first position is a fairly accurate description of the Vatican figure. It is, therefore, clear that Philostratus at least saw in this figure, or the type which it preserves, an actual athlete. To use him as authority against such an interpretation of the statue is obviously inadmissible.

Both arguments of Mr. Habich are, therefore, invalid; and his assertion as to how a discus-thrower ought to take his stand cannot prove his case. If Mr. Habich, on the other hand, is right, and if really the discus cannot, or could not, be thrown

by a man who has taken his stand with his right leg in advance, then he has simply added one more instance to the many already known that prove that the ancients took liberties in representing subjects from life. They sought to represent the “idea,” and were little concerned with the detailed fidelity of their representations.

EDMUND VON MACH.